DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 366 CG 018 601

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TITLE The Remarried Family: Variables Affecting Adjustment to Stepmothering.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (93rd, Los Angeles, CA, August 23-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Family Relationship; *Life Satisfaction; Marital Satisfaction; *Mothers; Parent Child Relationship; Predictor Variables; Remarriage; *Stepfamily; *Well Being

ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in the numbers of remarried families, little research has examined interpersonal relationships within these stepfamilies. Interpersonal and family systems variables which may contribute to stepmothers' satisfaction were examined in 65 part- and full-time stepmothers aged 22-27 and in 65 stepchildren aged 10-16. Eleven instruments were used to determine: (1) the extent to which the stepmother had achieved healthy differentiation from her family of origin; (2) marital satisfaction; (3) the amount of conflict existing between the biological parents; (4) the extent to which the biological father invested the stepmother with parental responsibilites; (5) the degree of other life stress experienced by the stepmother; (6) the amount of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship as perceived by the stepchild; and (7) the stepchild's adjustment to the biological parents' divorce. Results of the multiple regression analyses revealed that the group of predictor variables was significantly related to both indices of adjustment, satisfaction with role, and general well-being. The extent to which the biological father invested the stepmother with parental responsibilities and thereby created a parental unit was the most powerful predictor of stepmother satisfaction. The amount of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship also had a significant effect on satisfaction with the stepmother role. Specific aspects of differentiation from family of origin relating to autonomy, intergenerational boundary definition, and mutuality were found to play a salient role in stepmother's adjustment. (Author/NRB)

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THE REMARRIED FAMILY: VARIABLES AFFECTING ADJUSTMENT TO STEPMOTHERING

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CG 018601

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, 93rd, Los Angeles, CA, August 23-27, 1985.

ABSTRACT

The Remarried Family: Variables Affecting
Adjustment to Stepmothering

Sandra Goodman-Lezin, Ph.D.

Interpersonal and family systems variables which contribute to stepmothers' satisfaction with role and general well-being were examined. The variables assessed were: 1) the extent to which the stepmother has achieved healthy differentiation from her family of origin; 2) marital satisfaction; 3) the amount of conflict existing between the biological parents; 4) the extent to which the biological father invests the stepmother with parental responsibilities and thereby creates a parental unit; 5) the degree of other life stress experienced by the stepmother; 6) the amount of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship as perceived by the stepchild and 7) the adjustment to the impact of the biological parents' divorce on the part of the stepchild.

Results of the multiple regression analyses revealed that the group of predictor variables was significantly related to both indices of adjustment, satisfaction with role and general well-being. The extent to which the biological father invests the stepmother with parental responsibilities and thereby creates a parental unit was the most powerful predictor of stepmother satisfaction. The amount of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship also had a significant effect on satisfaction with the stepmother role. Specific aspects of differentiation from family of origin relating to autonomy, intergenerational boundary definition, and mutuality were found to play a salient role in stepmother's adjustment.

THE REMARRIED FAMILY: VARIABLES AFFECTING ADJUSTMENT TO STEPMOTHERING

Sandra Goodman-Lezin, Ph.D.

(Paper presented at the 1985 Summer Convention
of the American Psychological Association
as part of
Symposium on Family Life Transitions:
A Program of Empirical Research)

As a result of the shifting patterns and changes in the structure of the nuclear family, increasing numbers of individuals involved in divorce, and the number of subsequent remarriages, there has been a tremendous acceleration in the frequency with which individuals may find themselves in a remarried family system. Projections from current demographic trends indicate that 45% of children currently being born in the United States will live in either a single-parent or stepparent household before the age of 18. It has also been estimated that by the year 1990 single-parent and remarried family systems will at last come to outnumber nuclear family households. More than 550,000 remarried families are being formed each year in the United States alone. Through this process, at least 20-25 million adults and 15-18 million children are involved in steprelationships (Glick, 1980; Visher and Visher, 1979).

However, in spite of the tremendous increase in the numbers of remarried families, the empirical and theoretical literature which address the phenomenon have been somewhat limited until the last few years. The research that does exist indicates that the stepmother-stepchild relationship is the dyad within the remarried family system particularly vulnerable for

conflict, difficulties, and tensions. Few studies are available, however, which have attempted to assess the significant issues in the stepmother's environment and within the family system--issues which contribute to the stepmother's psychological well-being, success, failure or sense of personal sat sfaction with her role.

In light of the volume of women and children who become involved in stepmother-stepchild relationships and the number of individuals experiencing distress attendant to such life changes, the research I will be presenting to you today, arose out of both a personal and professional desire to clarify those variables that do in fact contribute to a successful adjustment and sense of personal satisfaction with the role of being a stepmother. The research was an attempt to elucidate the dynamics contributing to stepmother satisfaction and shed some light on what can be done within the psychotherapeutic context to assist women and children into achieving more harmonious stepmother-stepchild relationships. The theoretical and empirical literature upon which this research was based is drawn primarily from the works of Ahrons, Bowen, Carter and McGoldrick, Clingempeel, Nadler, Sager, and Visher & Visher.

The research was exploratory in nature and focussed upon clarifying those variables which affect and have impact upon the dependent variables of general well-being and role satisfaction for the stepmother. The research addressed crucial variables such as the stepchild's post-divorce adjustment and the amount of conflict he/she experiences in relation to the stepmother, as significant factors affecting the quality of the

stepmother-stepchild relationship. As the stepmother does not function within a vacuum but rather within the context of the relationship with her stepchild, these dynamics were incorporated into the variable set explored in the research.

The other specific independent variables that were explored included: 1) the extent to which the stepmother has achieved healthy differentiation from her family of origin; 2) her satisfaction with her marriage; 3) her perception of the amount of conflict existing between the biological parents; 4) the extent to which the biological father invests the stepmother with parental responsibilities in relationship with the stepchild; and 5) the degree of other life stress experienced by the stepmother.

The following instruments were used to assess the independent variables: The Parental Relationship Inventory (Lich, 1985; Silver Stutman, 1984); The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976); The Postseparation Parental Relationship Inventory (Wax, 1985; adapted by Goodman-Lezin, 1985); The Life Experiences Survey (Sarason et al., 1978); The Child's Report of Impact of Separation by Parents--Revised (Wax, 1985); The Conflict Over Childrearing Scale (based upon Snyder, 1981) and The Stepchild's Attitude Towards Stepmother Scale (Goodman-Lezin, 1985) created by the investigator for the purposes of the research. The dependent variables were assessed via The Dissatisfaction With Stepchildren Scale (based upon Snyder, 1981 and adapted for use with remarried families) and The Mental Health Inventory (Ware et al., 1979). Stepmothers also completed

a Background Information Questionnaire and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960).

The research sample consisted of 65 full and part-time stepmothers and 65 stepchildren. Stepmothers were between the ages of 22-57 and stepchildren between the ages of 10 and 16. The mean age of the stepchildren was 13. Fifty-two percent of the stepchildren were male and 48% were female. Data were collected in approximately one hour visits to the family home.

Simultaneous multiple regressions were performed on each of the dependent variables and the set of independent variables. For the dependent variable of satisfaction with the stepmother role, the variable set was found to be significantly and positively related to the dependent variable. This result was confirmed in the regression performed yielding a multiple R of .78. Stepwise multiple regression was then performed to further determine which of the members of the variable set were contributing the most weight in the variance. In this regression, one variable in particular emerged as a significant predictor of stepmother's satisfaction with her role, that of the biological father's investing the stepmother with parental responsibilities or the extent to which she actually functions in a parental role in relationship with the stepchild. This variable accounted for 54% ($p<.001$) of the variance. Additionally, the level of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship accounted for a significant proportion of the variability above and beyond the first predictor, yielding an additional 4% ($p<.05$) of the variance. Therefore, these two

predictors together accounted for 58% of the variability in satisfaction with the stepmother role ($p<.001$).

The second simultaneous regression was performed on the dependent variable of stepmother's general well-being and yielded a multiple R of .69. Stepwise regression was then utilized, yielding two strong predictors of general well-being: stepmother's satisfaction with her marriage which accounted for 38% ($p<.001$) of the variability, and her satisfaction in the stepmother role which contributed an additional 6% ($p<.05$) of the variance. Thus, together marital satisfaction and satisfaction in the stepmother role accounted for 44% of the variance in stepmother's general well-being.

Correlations between the dependent, independent variables, and the individual subscales of the Parental Relationship Inventory measuring differentiation from family of origin, were also performed. These yielded significant correlations between three of the subscales and the independent variable of the extent to which the biological father and stepmother function together as a parental unit. Therefore, while healthy versus unhealthy differentiation from family of origin per se did not emerge as a significant predictor for either of the dependent variables, it does appear to play a role in the stepmother's ability to function effectively in a parental role with the stepchild.

Several interesting additional correlations among the variables emerged from the data analysis. One particularly interesting finding was that of a strong relationship between the

two dependent variables, stepmother's satisfaction with her role and her general well-being. A correlation was also found between the variables of stepmother's satisfaction and the amount of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship indicating that the less conflict existing between the stepmother and stepchild, the greater her reported satisfaction with the role.

However, one of the most striking of the findings was the correlation between the level of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship and the stepchild's adaptive responses to the impact of his/her parent's divorce. Therefore, one can speculate that the more adaptive the child's response to the parent's divorce, the less conflict is in fact experienced by the child in relationship with the stepmother. This finding certainly has profound implications regarding the impact of the child's divorce experience and his/her capacity to bond effectively with a stepmother. Future research might explore whether the existence of a positive healthy relationship with the stepmother may in fact, help to mend or resolve some of the child's unresolved issues of loss surrounding the divorce experience.

Additionally, a correlation was found between the level of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship and the amount of conflict existing between the biological parents of the stepchild. It appears therefore, that the greater the conflict existing between the biological parents, the more conflict is experienced by the stepchild in relationship with his/her stepmother. This finding gives additional support to previous

research (Ahrons, 1981; Ahrons and Perlmutter, 1982; Hess and Camara, 1979) that the quality of the postdivorce parental relationship is a critical factor in the child's postdivorce adjustment and extends this beyond the divorce experience, into the child's capacity to experience healthy relationships within the context of the remarried family.

Several planned post-hoc analyses were also performed. A few interesting findings that had been predicted based upon previous research were not confirmed. However, previous research and common mythology about stepparenting suggested that these factors contributed to the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. Keeping in mind the limitations of the research, one can take comfort in the fact that the age of the stepmother, the age or sex of the stepchild, prior marital experience of the stepmother or having had children of one's own, were not significant factors in how satisfied or pleased women reported to be in the stepmother role, nor did they affect her general well-being.

Finally, two incidental findings are worth mentioning. The amount of time the stepmother actually spent with the stepchild correlated significantly with the stepmother's general well-being, however, in a negative direction, therefore, indicating that the greater amount of time the stepmother actually spends with the stepchild the worse her general well-being! This strongly suggests that functioning in a stepmother-stepchild relationship is indeed a very stressful experience, however, future research would have to determine if

this is in fact, any more stressful than functioning in a mother-child relationship. Many of the women who participated in the research commented that they didn't "envy" any woman in their position and that if they had it to do over again, that weren't sure they would elect to take on the responsibilities of stepmotherhood. One woman commented that as a result of functioning in the stepmother-stepchild relationship even when she felt very lovingly towards the stepchild, that it was indeed a painful and stressful role. Her comment was: "I've never had to confront as much in myself that I didn't like."

However, the results of the research did indicate that the stepchild's having been in psychotherapy was significantly related to the stepmother's sense of general well-being, therefore, suggesting that the psychotherapeutic experience for the stepchild does indeed have value and contributes towards positive functioning within the context of the stepmother-stepchild relationship.

In conclusion, the results of the research point to several salient predictors of satisfactory functioning within the stepmother role, the most powerful of these being the extent to which the biological father and the stepmother function together as a parental unit in the raising of the stepchild. This has important clinical implications and points to the need of strengthening the bond between the biological father and stepmother. Also, it becomes crucial then, that the biological father sanction the stepmother with parental responsibilities. It is common in remarried families for the biological father to

try to shield their children from the stepmother or to protect the stepmother for their children. In such instances, the biological father induces a wedge between the stepmother and stepchild who may become increasingly reluctant to allow a bond with the stepmother to even develop. They may come to see their stepmother as powerless and useless in their lives and subsequently, do not regard her as a force with which they must contend. This only further exacerbates the difficulties in the stepmother's attempts to establish and maintain a solid and meaningful bond with her stepchild. The results of the research indicate that this variable is a major factor leading to a greater sense of satisfaction for the stepmother herself and thereby, the entire remarried family system.

Additionally, clinical work around issues of differentiation with the family of origin is also implicated from the results into helping women in the stepmother role achieve the capacity to function effectively within the complex parental role of stepparent. Given the additional stresses and strains of stepfamily life, this is not any easy task. A woman who has not mastered basic issues of differentiation from her own family of origin, may have more difficulty assuming the parental function in relation to the stepchild. Therapeutic work may need to address these crucial issues if a woman in a stepmother role is to experience a sense of satisfaction and positive general well-being. These issues should be kept in mind by the clinician when assessing the dysfunction and distress reported by many women and other members of remarried families seeking assistance

in navigating these complex roles and relationships.

In light of the above findings, the importance of strengthening the marital alliance between the biological father and stepmother may be an significant avenue in effecting change within the entire family system. Resolution of loyalty conflicts for the stepchild between the biological mother and stepmother and other issues that contribute to the presence and escalation of conflict in the stepmother-stepchild relationship, need to be addressed towards the aim of establishing greater harmony between the stepchild and his or her stepmother. Given the findings of the research, there is certainly strong evidence for the direct and clear benefit of the stepchild's participation in psychotherapy and the capacity to achieve more harmonious and satisfying relationships for both stepmothers and their stepchildren.

Therefore, the clinician who is aware of, and sensitive to the complexities of the dynamics of the remarried family system, and to the specific difficulties for women in the stepmother role, can contribute a great deal in facilitating smooth and harmonious functioning in this unique and special role.

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